



TEXAS JUVENILE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

Response to the Independent Ombudsman First Quarter Report, FY 2019 January 23, 2019

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) has received the FY 2019 First Quarter Report from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO), and appreciates this opportunity to respond.

Significant Issues

The first significant issue addressed by the OIO was the staffing shortage at some of the state secure facilities and the increasing population levels during the first quarter. At the beginning of the first quarter, there were 887 total youth in the five secure facilities. This number peaked during this quarter at 952 youth in mid-October 2018. Currently, agency wide population data shows 849 total youth in the five state secure facilities.

Active case management is critical to maintaining proper staffing ratios at the state facilities. It is likely the rising population can be attributed to continued burdensome processes needed for active case management. In response, the agency implemented methods to streamline the information-sharing process between the facilities and central office and to institutionalize routine case management as a consistent way of doing business. These methods relieve some of the unnecessary front-end burdens before a youth may be processed and his/her case elevated for central office approval.

The OIO also highlighted concern of the staffing ratio at the Gainesville State School and the McLennan County State Juvenile Correctional Facility (Mart). To improve the specific issues at these facilities, TJJD instituted temporary population caps on both Gainesville and the Mart long-term facilities. These caps will help maintain a stable, manageable, population level until other reforms are in place and staffing can be better managed.

The case management and population cap for these facilities are already showing positive results in the total population. During the months covered in this quarterly report (September 2018 – November 2018), the Mart long-term facility had populations of 177, 189, and 175. Currently, the facility population is 144 total youth residents. During the months covered in this quarterly report, the Gainesville facility had populations of 202, 203, and 192. Currently the facility population is 163 total youth residents.

TJJD continues to work on multiple solutions to the issues that arise from staffing shortages. In addition to actively managing facility populations, the agency has posted two “recruiter” positions to help hire more staff. The agency is ready to move forward moving some static staffing positions “on the floor” to engage directly with youth. TJJD also emphasized facility

staffing in its LAR exceptional items request of over \$2.4 million over the next biennium to help the agency hire additional staff, and the placement of direct-care staff further down in the 10% reduction schedule. The agency continues to focus on filling, training, and retaining critical supervisory staff in a myriad of ways. Additionally, TJJD is focusing on more consistent models of dorm staffing that allow for more team-based focuses and an increase in the percentage of staff in direct-care, dorm-based roles.

Major disruption at Gainesville State School

The most significant issue addressed in this OIO report was the major campus disruptions by youth at the Gainesville State School. TJJD staff identified a life safety mechanism that was easily tampered with, which allowed doors to unlock as if there was an emergency. In response, the agency installed an interim solution to prevent these disruptions while still providing necessary life safety mechanisms. This solution will be in place while the agency finishes its assessment and implementation of larger fire safety improvements.

TJJD wants to thank the OIO for its support when agency executive management mandated a facility-wide shut down in response to these disruptions. The agency placed additional personnel from other facilities to support the ongoing operations. Those staff helped identify other safety and security issues at the Gainesville facility. TJJD executive management also made the decision to make changes to facility leadership.

Following the disruptions, eight members of TJJD senior management spent three days at the Gainesville campus. While there, they held three staff town hall meetings, and conducted several small group meetings with facility management, dorm supervisors, JCO supervisors, case managers, the gang prevention and intervention specialists, education staff, and facility youth. During these meetings, agency management was able to identify some unique issues at Gainesville and begin to focus on implementing needed changes on that campus.

TJJD agrees with the OIO's assessment of some of the reasons for these campus wide disruptions. The culture of the campus allowed for some gang-related youth activity, and the new facility administration is actively working on solving for the root cause of this gang activity. It is also believed that a lack of consistent structured programming and a desire by the youth to protest were major factors that led to the disruptions. The facility operated with minimal time for youth to engage in additional programming, and the youth were confined to their dorms for a larger portion of the day than is optimal. The Director of State Programs and the new Director of Facility Safety will conduct staff retraining focused on how to properly engage with our youth. There will also be a campus-wide training at Gainesville on more trauma-informed recreational activities to fill down time. This training is schedule for January 28-29, 2019.

Even with the significant issues identified in this quarterly report, TJJD continues to be encouraged by the trend of fewer youth complaints, specifically the downward trend of complaints regarding facility safety. This highlights the agency's efforts of increasing safety and security, which is key to helping the youth properly regulate their behavior and reactions to stress. These efforts are moving quickly but will take some time; we very much appreciate the insights provided by the OIO in helping us to focus on key issues.